

When I was a Head Start teacher many years ago, I used to sing with the preschool children in my class, “If You’re Happy and You Know It.” The song would invite us to clap our hands if we’re happy, shake a foot, wave hello, or a number of other motions. It was a good way to get the kids moving and release some energy, thereby helping them focus on the next activity of the day. It was also a way of celebrating happiness, which sometimes seems to be so elusive, so hard to find.

Wouldn’t it be nice to just clap our hands and be happy anytime we wanted? Sometimes being happy is not so easy, but we may carry around in our heads misinformation about how to find happiness.

A recent article I read listed several myths about happiness, such as “If I have lots of money, I will be happy.”¹ Money can help provide the basics of life, such as shelter and food, but after these basic needs are met, studies have shown that extra income doesn’t seem to make much difference in regard to happiness.

Another myth is “When I find true love, then I will be happy.” Love can be a wonderful gift, but it can also be painful. Love can inspire us to be better people, but it doesn’t necessarily bring happiness.

I think most of us might identify with another happiness myth in the list: “When life is normal again, then I can be happy again.” Oh, how we long for life to be normal again! Just as we thought we had gotten through a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, it seems to be shaking the world again. If we wait for normal in order to gain happiness, we may never be happy again. Just where do we find it?

One older man searched for happiness his entire life, but he seemed unable to find it, and the whole village was tired of him, he was always gloomy, constantly complained and always was in a bad mood. The longer he lived, the more bile was becoming and the more poisonous were his words. People avoided him because his misfortune became contagious. It was even unnaturally and insulting to be happy next to him. He created the feeling of unhappiness in others.

But one day, when he became 80 years old, an incredible thing happened. Instantly everyone heard the rumor: “The Old Man is happy today, he doesn’t complain about anything, he smiles, and even his face is freshened up.” The whole village gathered together.

Someone asked: “What happened to you?”

The old man answered, “Nothing special. Eighty years I’ve been chasing happiness, and it was useless. And then...I decided to live without happiness and just enjoy life... That is why I am happy now!”²

The writer of the opening psalm in the collection of Psalms in the Bible offered a suggestion for happiness: love God’s teachings and recite them day and night. In doing so, you will be like a tree planted by the stream that bears fruit and has leaves that don’t fade.

For those living thousands of years ago in an arid part of the world, often dry and hot, the imagery of a stream and healthy tree was bound to sound attractive. Even today, I think the imagery is captivating. Imagine yourself sitting under a beautiful tree, shaded by the green leaves, eating

the fruit from the tree as you listen to a babbling brook nearby. There you are reciting God’s teachings all day and all night.

Wait a minute, you might be thinking. The imagery is captivating about the tree, but the reciting of God’s teachings all day long, I’m not so sure. There are other things to get done; I can’t sit around all day and read the Bible nonstop or memorize scripture to recite all day long. Is there another way to be happy? Maybe a shortcut version? Read a few verses in the morning before I run out the door? Would that be enough?

The Psalmist offers another suggestion about happy people: they don’t follow wicked advice, they don’t stand on the road with sinners, and they don’t sit with the disrespectful.

Oh, that sounds much easier, doesn’t it? We would all agree that we don’t hang out the with “wrong” people, especially those who offer wicked advice...but how do we know which advice is wicked? At a recent Elkhart County Council meeting, for example, discussion centered around a \$3

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million grant for the Health Department to help educate our communities about health, with the “hiring of six community health workers who would have focused on Black, Hispanic and Amish populations.”³ What a great idea, right? Well, not according to those who don’t want to hear any more about COVID and are afraid of vaccine or masking requirements that could be part of the grant. Which group do we label as offering wicked advice? I doubt any of those in the discussion came away experiencing happiness.

What about standing in the road with sinners? Surely, we can avoid them, right? But who’s the sinner? One column writer for the *Los Angeles Times* was confront with niceness from someone she considered a sinner. Her neighbor had strong political views that differed from her own, but the neighbors did something surprisingly nice last February. She wrote how they

“plowed our driveway without being asked and did a great job.

How am I going to resist demands for unity in the face of this act of aggressive niceness?

Of course, on some level, I realize I owe them thanks — and, man, it really looks like the guy back-dragged the driveway like a pro — but how much thanks?⁴

Who’s the sinner here? The one who had radical political beliefs and yet plowed the snow, or the one who had a hard time saying thank you?

That’s the problem with labeling one another as us and them...liberal or conservative...vaxer or unmasker...believer or sinner. I think there’s a little believer and sinner in all of us. At times our faith shines into the world, offering a beacon of light to those who look at our lives. At other times, we may say or do something that falls into the sinner category, for to sin means to miss the target, to not hit the bullseye. Have you ever done that? Messed up something? Made a mistake? Said an unkind word? Muttered something judgmental about someone? If so, you missed the target of what God has in mind for your life.

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That's where God's grace steps in, for each day we get another chance. If we miss the target one day, we get another shot the next day. Maybe the Psalmist had a good idea after all, to review God's teachings about grace every day, throughout the day, meditating on it both day and night. In doing so, you may discover how to be happy, not due to

money or fame or power or popularity, but because God loves you at each moment of the day, just as you are, even when you hang out with others who have broken lives, just like your own. So, if you're happy and you know it, clap your hands...and say "amen."

¹ Barton Goldsmith, "7 myths about happiness," August 7-8, 2021, *The Elkhart Truth*, B4.

² <https://www.inspirationalstories.eu/inspirational-stories-about-happiness/>

³ Jordan Fouts, "County rejects \$3M health education grant," September 14, 2021, *The Elkhart Truth*, A1.

⁴ Virginia Heffernan, "What can you do about the Trumpites next door?" Feb. 5, 2021, www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-05/trumpite-neighbor-unity-capitol-attack